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FOR NEA/ARP:AMACDONALD

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TAGS: PGOV PREL KDRG PTER YM
SUBJECT: PRESIDENT SALEH PRESSES FOR VISIT TO WASHINGTON

Classified By: Ambassador Stephen A. Seche for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (S) A clearly agitated President Saleh complained to the Ambassador July 20 that it was a negative recommendation from Embassy Sana'a that was preventing the White House from extending an invitation to him for an official visit with President Obama. The Ambassador clarified to Saleh that his recommendation has been, and remains, that the visit should be scheduled at a moment that will allow the two presidents to highlight the success of our bilateral relations in key areas such as counter-terrorism, and political and economic reform. Noting that he will travel to France in 10 days, Saleh pressed for an answer from the White House as to whether he should plan on adding Washington to his itinerary.

End Summary.

¶2. (S) During a very spirited discussion that lasted nearly 30 minutes, President Saleh and the Ambassador spoke candidly about internal crises in Yemen confronting his government, and what the USG contribution to solving these crises should be. The Ambassador began the meeting by noting President Obama's continued desire to welcome Saleh to the White House, and our continued gratitude to Saleh for his cooperation on the disposition of Yemeni GTMO detainees. The key question, the Ambassador stated, was to identify the most appropriate time for the visit, to maximize its positive impact and further our bilateral goals. At that point, Saleh launched somewhat inexplicably into extended criticism of the Yemeni opposition and US Embassy contacts with it, claiming that the Embassy accepts unquestioningly the view of the opposition and reports it back to Washington unchallenged. Saleh asserted: "I gave the opposition its legitimacy and I can take it away from them." The Ambassador reminded the President that it was his responsibility and that of his Embassy to engage both the ruling party and the opposition. He added that the President seemed to be under the misapprehension that US Embassy officials met with the opposition to encourage them to create problems for the government; on the contrary, the Ambassador said, "we encourage them to find a way to participate fully in the political process in this country in order to benefit the people of Yemen."

¶3. (S) Saleh then stated that "I have heard from Washington that you (the Ambassador) have recommended against my visiting at this time" because of unhappiness with the way the President is managing the internal problems facing the country. The Ambassador said a Presidential visit to Washington without some clear progress on key issues would likely mobilize Saleh's critics and generate a negative environment that would benefit neither government, nor the bilateral relationship. Saleh asked for an example of where progress was needed, and the Ambassador suggested a successful operation against Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula would be welcome. The President responded sharply

that his government has invited the USG to come into Yemen and support operations against senior AQAP leadership figures. The Ambassador said that we are cooperating closely with ROYG security services on such operations at present and continuing intensive training of these services so they can act effectively against terrorist organizations. Saleh said he couldn't understand why we were "suspicious" of Yemen's commitment to the counter-terrorism, noting that Yemen suffers far more than the United States as a result of it. The Ambassador said: "I'm not suspicious. I'm simply impatient, as I know you are," for results.

¶4. (S) Saleh identified counter-terrorism cooperation as one of the three subjects he wanted to discuss with President Obama. The other two were:

* GTMO detainees: Saleh said that it was up to the USG to decide what it wants to do with Yemeni detainees) return them to Yemen or convince the Saudis to take them. He pressed, however, for funding, from either our government or the Saudi government) for a rehabilitation facility, noting that he was willing to place the detainees in a "hotel" until the facility was ready to house them permanently. The Ambassador replied that he respectfully disagreed with the President's suggestion, raised during their last meeting, to use the grounds of the former US Embassy in downtown Sanaa (now under renovation as a boutique hotel) as a facility for returning detainees, noting that an earlier proposal to use an abandoned military base near Aden seemed far more appropriate. The Ambassador also noted that he has been pressing for a decision on the funding for a Yemeni rehabilitation facility and hoped that ongoing discussions in Washington would produce one soon.

* Political reform: Saleh insisted, as he has before, that the Southern Movement is under control, and that the ROYG recognizes the need to devolve authority to the individual governorates. The Ambassador proposed an additional subject for discussion in Washington:

* Economic revitalization: The Ambassador asserted that the international donor community is looking to the President for direction in this key area. "We want to undertake initiatives that will stabilize your economy, address the issue of unemployment, but we need you and your government to identify for us those areas where we should be focusing our assistance." In response, Saleh asked that the USG intervene with GCC countries to encourage them to accept more Yemeni workers, noting the salutary effect this would have on Yemen's unemployment problem.

¶5. (S) As the conversation drew to a close, the President said that he will be travelling to France in 10 days to discuss with the GOF the ongoing investigation into the crash of the Yemenia Air flight near the Comoros Islands on June 30, and sales of liquefied natural gas once Yemen exports begin. (Comment. It is unclear what the president has in mind in this second instance, since contracts already exist for export of LNG from Yemen over the next 20 years to South Korea and the United States. End comment.) He said he would postpone his trip to Paris and go first to Washington if that was the preference of the Obama Administration. The Ambassador promised to convey his message to Washington and return with a response as quickly as one was received. Saleh said as the Ambassador departed, "if I don't go (to Washington) now, I will never go."

¶6. (S) Comment. This Embassy has made no bones about the fact that it believes that it would be a mistake to invite Saleh to the White House before he demonstrates a serious resolve to address the multiple internal challenges he confronts at the moment. It is quite easy to imagine that Yemen's Ambassador to Washington is the individual responsible for passing this message back to President Saleh, although that does beg the question as to how Ambassador al-Hajjri learned of Embassy Sanaa's view. All that aside, we still believe it would be a mistake to reward Saleh for his inactivity in the face of serious internal crises by inviting him to Washington at this time. We don't take his threat to "never" travel to Washington seriously, and believe

he will accept the invitation when and if we extend it. End

Comment.

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